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U. S. Department of Agriculture

Housekeepers' Chat

Friday, July 4, 1930.

Not for Publication

Subject: "Pointers on Painless Picnics - How to Avoid Snakes and Mosquitoes."

Bulletins available: "Poisonous Snakes of the United States."

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Now what would you do, if you were accustomed to answering questions about cooking and sewing and interior decorating, and some one should ask you a lot of questions about snakes? Will snakes attack human beings? How can we avoid snake bite? What to do if you're picnicking, and some one is bitten by a snake? How can you tell whether the snake was venomous? And how do you treat snake bites?

Well, when I received a letter with all those questions, I was non-plussed, to say the least. For all the snakes I know are in the zoo, and I've never inquired as to their personal habits. Do they bite? Well, they look wicked enough to bite. There's an enormous boa constrictor that I wouldn't want to meet up with accidentally, outside his glass cage. Why are snakes so mysterious, and so fascinating? Every time I go to the zoo, on Sunday afternoon, there's a crowd around the snake cages.

I showed my letter to Uncle Ebenezer. "What shall I do?" I asked him. "I can't fail the man, who wants the information. He's taking his family to a summer camp, and like as not, if I don't answer the letter carefully, one of the children will be bitten by a snake, and I'll have that on my conscience for ever and ever."

"Oh, don't take it so seriously," said Uncle Ebenezer. "There's a man in the Department of Agriculture -- Mr. Uhler, who is a specialist in the study of reptiles. Why don't you take the questions to Mr. Uhler?"

I did. I began with the first question: "Will snakes attack human beings?"

"No," said Mr. Uhler. "They will not. No snakes are known deliberately to attack human beings. But, a few will defend themselves vigorously if suddenly disturbed or cornered. This is true particularly of our venomous snakes. Hence the need for special care to avoid their bite."

"What are the general precautions to observe in order to avoid their bite?" I asked.

"Well, in the first place, before establishing a summer camp, ask local residents whether poisonous snakes are abundant in the region. There are many fine locations and camps in places where venomous snakes are rare or unknown. Use common sense by way of avoiding unnecessary contact with snakes. Several serious accidents have resulted from undue familiarity with snakes. Caution children not to collect or harbor living poisonous snakes.

"If you go into areas where venomous snakes abound, do three things: First, wear high-topped boots or leather puttees and shoes high enough to protect the ankles. Even canvas leggings afford valuable protection. Very few snakes are powerful enough to bite through any of these coverings. Second, be careful where you place your hands, when climbing over rocky places, fences, logs, brush piles, and similar situations, for a coiled snake is easily concealed in a crevice or hollow. Finally, look around carefully, before you stoop over to drink at a spring. A bite about the head or neck is likely to be much more serious than one on the limbs."

"But suppose," I said, "that somebody is bitten. Can one tell, from looking at the bit, whether the snake was venomous?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Uhler. "You can identify the bite of a venomous snake by the pair of conspicuous fang punctures produced by the poison-secreting fangs. Occasionally, you also may find a slight impression left by a double row of small teeth, between and behind the poison fangs."

"On the other hand, you usually can identify the bite of a harmless snake by two outer rows of punctures of similar size, caused by the numerous recurved teeth on the margins of both jaws, with a double row of smaller tooth marks occasionally showing between them."

"Of course, the surest identification lies in the results of the bite. You may know that the snake was harmless, if no obvious discomfort develops within ten minutes after being bitten. The bite of a poisonous snake develops a burning sensation in the vicinity of the wound, in 3 to 5 minutes. Within 15 or 20 minutes, a distinct swelling can be noted. The victim perspires profusely, as the swelling continues; vomiting also may result."

"What is the treatment for snake bite?" was my next question.

"When bitten by a poisonous snake," said Mr. Uhler, "send for a doctor at once, or go to him, if possible. Pending treatment by a physician, if the bite is on arm or leg, immediately apply a ligature or tourniquet a few inches above the wound. For a tourniquet, you can use a large handkerchief, a cord, a shoe string, a piece of small rubber tubing, or even a garter. Remember to release it for a minute out of each quarter of an hour, because if circulation is cut off too long, gangrene may set in. Make a cross-cut incision about a half inch long, and a fourth inch deep, at each fang mark, using a sharp, clean knife or razor blade. This allows part of the poisonous fluid to escape. Mechanical suction helps to remove the venom. Devices to do this are now on the market. In an emergency, the victim or a companion can suck out the poison. But be sure there are no cuts or wounds about the mouth, for snake venom is active through cuts or wounds. After removing all the venom possible, wash the wound with a mild antiseptic and cover with moist gauze to facilitate drainage for 24 hours. A serum, counteracting the effects of all except bites of the coral snake, is now on the market. This serum is injected with a hypodermic syringe. I'm told by the U. S. Public Health Service that the firm of H. K. Mulford Company of Philadelphia has been licensed to produce it. Directions for its use are included with the serum."

"Will you tell me," I asked next, "what sort of a kit for treatment of snake bites you carry when you're going into areas infested with venomous snakes?"

"Yes," said Mr. Uhler, "I carry and recommend a compact emergency kit containing a syringe filled with serum, a tourniquet, a sharp, one-sided safety razor blade, a small bottle of antiseptic, and a roll of gauze. Compact cupping devices, which remove part of the venom by suction, are also of much value," concluded Mr. Uhler.

That's all the information about snakes I have on hand today -- but if you aren't satisfied, and want to know more, before you go camping, I suggest that you send for a circular called "Poisonous Snakes of the United States." It contains much valuable information regarding the bites of venomous snakes.

There's another question here, about mosquitoes. I asked Mr. Webb, also of the Department of Agriculture, what to do about mosquitoes.

"When you pick out a camp site," said Mr. Webb, "look around first and see that you don't locate near a swampy area, or any place where there is stagnant water. Such places produce mosquitoes, and you don't just exactly need them in your program. However, in case you can't avoid them, take along a bottle of citronella, and put a few drops on your pillow at night. This will help keep them away.

"If you stay long in one place, you are likely to find your camp attractive to several species of flies. And how they do like to come around at meal time! Many a woman has lost her religion on less provocation than this. The best thing to do, if flies are bad, is to have with you a small hand spray gun and some undiluted pine oil. Shoot some of this into the air, and on the grass around your table. This will have a restraining influence on the flies for a short time at least, and you won't mind them so much after you've had a good meal. And while I'm on the subject of eatables, I might just caution you to keep the food where ants can't get to it. This can be done by binding strips of sticky fly paper tightly around the table legs, and keeping the reserve food on the table between meals. Of course, if you are camped near a cold mountain stream, nothing is better than putting the food in a water-tight container and then anchoring it in the stream," concluded Mr. Webb.

And that's the answer to the mosquito question -- and then some. If you want to know more about mosquitoes, I suggest that you get the bulletin on "Mosquito Control."

Next Monday we'll be ready for another menu, and the recipe I promised you for today.

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